

AMBASSADOR ROBERT FORD
CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY FOR THE RECORD
HOUSE FOREIGN AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

March 20, 2013

Chairman Casey and Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to present an overview of our response to the crisis in Syria.

This past weekend marked the two year anniversary of the Syrian conflict. The country looks disturbingly different today than it did then. What started out as a peaceful demand for dignity and freedom, when a few, young boys scribbled the fateful words “down with the regime” on a wall in Deraa, has turned into a devastating conflict with a growing human toll.

Syrians face a new level of ruthlessness from the Asad regime, which is raining Scud missiles down on residential neighborhoods, destroying hospitals and schools, and sending its thugs rampaging through the streets to terrorize their fellow citizens. The carnage is appalling. For instance, we have heard that some Syrian parents who still send their children to school now stitch their child’s name on school uniforms. That makes it easier to identify the bodies.

According to the U.N., more than 70,000 Syrians have died since the beginning of the conflict and the number is rising as the fighting in Damascus intensifies. More than one million people have left their homes in Syria to seek refuge in another country – a number that could triple by the end of 2013 if the rise in numbers continues at its current rate.

The increase in refugees – in addition to the potential spillover of ethnic and sectarian violence – has the potential to destabilize the region. Jordan’s Za’atari refugee camp is now Jordan’s fourth largest city. The refugees in Lebanon are now around 10 percent of that country’s population.

OUR RESPONSE

We are working to alleviate the human suffering. The United States is the largest bilateral humanitarian aid donor. And we are working to make sure the rest of the international community plays their part. In January at a conference in Kuwait, over forty countries pledged \$1.5 billion to help the Syrian refugees. We are pressuring the countries that have not yet paid to make good on their pledges – and I have personally asked our partners and Gulf and European countries to give the funds they promised.

The humanitarian assistance from the United States amounts to nearly \$385 million. This money is being spent on emergency medical care and supplies, blankets, and shelter. We are sending flour to 50 bakeries in Aleppo and sponsoring food and sanitation projects for the desperate families in Atmeh refugee camp. Our aid into opposition – controlled areas is often intentionally discreet to protect those delivering the aid, but it is significant.

The humanitarian assistance is vital but there is far more to do. Preserving Syria's national unity and laying the foundation for a free Syria that respects the rights of all its citizens is essential if we are to secure a Syria that helps, rather than threatens, stability in the heart of the Middle East. Collapse or fragmentation of the Syrian state or its takeover by extremists would threaten the region with hugely greater refugee flows, as well as the risks associated with the security of the regime's big chemical weapons stocks, and confront us also with the likelihood of major terrorist bases. Those outcomes would directly threaten our interests.

Therefore, apart from our humanitarian aid, we are providing non-lethal assistance to the Syrian opposition to:

- Solidify the efforts of Syrian moderates who are competing for influence with extremist groups, knitting the national opposition leadership with local councils on the ground inside Syria. The national opposition leadership needs to provide local communities with an alternative source of support to prevent the influence of al-Qaida's affiliates from expanding.
- Curtail the influence of extremists by helping national and local opposition leaders provide vital services such as food, water and electricity. Syrian activists and rebels are working hard to unite the opposition, establish local governing structures, and provide assistance to the many Syrians in need. We need to work with these courageous Syrians – both armed and unarmed – so that they can respond quickly to critical needs.
- Prevent the disintegration of the Syrian state by supporting a unified, inclusive, and effective civilian leadership at both national and local levels – and by retaining the civil servants that can keep state institutions functioning as Syrians struggle to recover from this conflict.

INVESTING IN SYRIANS

Let me offer a few specifics.

Our previous non-lethal assistance, totaling approximately \$54 million, focused on linking disparate Syrian opposition groups across the country to build a network of ethnically and religiously diverse civilian activists.

We supplied approximately 5,000 pieces of equipment, including communications gear, to enable activists to coordinate their efforts. Some activists used these tools to organize a Free Lawyer's Union, which now coordinates with the Local Council for the Governorate of Daraa and has taken responsibility for legal affairs within the local council.

We boosted radio signals, extending the reach of broadcast on FM stations, and funded media outlets. Then we used those media platforms to address sectarian violence and issue public service messages on chemical weapons exposure.

We also trained and equipped 1,500 local leaders and activists – including women and minorities – from over 100 Syrian opposition provincial councils. These graduates are improving the ability

of local committees and councils from Damascus to Deir al-Zour to Idlib to better provide for the needs of all members of their communities. One recent graduate played a critical role in the Aleppo LCC elections last week. He reached out to 240 delegates across Aleppo's liberated areas and broadcast the election – bringing credibility, transparency, and accountability to the process.

All of these efforts build on the work of our international partners in the region and in Europe.

BUILDING A NATIONAL APPARATUS

Since December 2012, the United States, along with our international partners, has acknowledged the Syrian Opposition Coalition as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people. Comprised of diverse representatives inside and outside Syria, the Coalition is committed to a democratic, inclusive Syria free from the influence of violent extremists.

In the months since its formation, the Coalition has coordinated discussion of transition planning and transitional justice. It has developed technical committees, including an Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU), to ensure that humanitarian assistance reaches Syrians in need. The Coalition has the ability to lead but it is directly competing with extremists, and we need to help it build credibility with the Syrian people.

On February 28, Secretary Kerry announced another \$60 million in non-lethal support to strengthen the Coalition's capacity to have a greater impact at the national and local levels. This new funding will tie the Coalition's national efforts to work being done by local groups and councils inside Syria.

The State Department will create a new, small grants initiative that the Coalition can use to help local councils meet the needs of their citizens. This will include supporting the work of these new governing institutions and helping them undertake service delivery projects for their communities.

USAID will build on this effort by providing the Coalition with two programs designed to have immediate impact. The first will provide short-term assistance for urgent needs, such as fuel, heaters, and nutritional and educational supplies for children. The second will support strategic, longer-term needs on behalf of the Coalition, such as repairing schools, local power, and sanitation. USAID will also provide the Coalition with technical experts to help it manage essential services and light infrastructure. These experts will help with assessments, project design, and track multi-donor rehabilitation efforts.

And we are looking to improve civilian security through training and some non-lethal equipment. This is critical to preventing a security vacuum in liberated areas that will be exploited by extremists if we do not help stand up civilian police.

Finally, to ensure that our assistance reaches its intended targets and does not end up in the hands of extremists, we will continue to use formal processes that have been established across various agencies in the government to vet the recipients.

CONCLUSION

We continue to believe that political transition is the best solution to the crisis in Syria. And we support the Geneva Communiqué, which calls for a transitional governing body with full executive powers and formed on the basis of mutual consent. Bashar al-Asad long ago lost his credibility and we cannot imagine the opposition would ever accept his participation in that transition government. He must step down.

We are working with our partners to strengthen moderate opposition and change the balance on the ground to help give the opposition the leverage they need to negotiate. The Asad regime, holding to power through brute force backed by Iran and Hizballah, will be held accountable for crimes against the Syrian people.

As Secretary Kerry said in Rome, “This is a complicated challenge, but the principle that guides us is simple: No nation should live in fear of its leaders, and all people deserve the freedom and opportunity to live in peace, dignity and justice.”

We look forward to working with Congress as we seek to support the needs of the Syrian people in their struggle to create a free, stable, and democratic Syria. Thank you again for the invitation to testify before your committee today. I am happy to take any questions you might have.